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Spring 2019

The Buffering Role of Character Virtues on the Relationship between Burnout and its Antecedents

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The Buffering Role of Character Virtues

on the Relationship between Burnout and its Antecedents

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Abstract

This project explores the relationship between character virtues and burnout among student employees. It reviews and elaborates on the previous research findings in positive psychology and uses existing research on human virtues in order to further study their relationship with burnout. In exchange for extra course credit, students completed an online survey comprised of a demographic questionnaire and measures of character virtues, burnout, job control, and work overload. Analysis of the results focused on the specific virtues of courage and transcendence and the burnout antecedents of work overload, and lack of control. A multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether or not the virtue of transcendence could help alleviate the effects of lack of control on burnout experience. The virtue of courage was also analyzed to learn what moderating effects it may have on the relationship between work overload and burnout. Contrary to my hypotheses, I found that courage did not significantly moderate the relationship between work overload and burnout, and transcendence did not significantly moderate the relationship between lack of control and burnout. However, consistent with past research, job control and work overload significantly predicted burnout experiences. Furthermore, results also indicated a significant negative correlation between both courage and transcendence in relation to burnout.

Keywords: burnout, virtues, positive psychology, I/O psychology

The Buffering Role of Character Virtues on the Relationship between Burnout and its
Antecedents

In recent years, as positive psychology has gained more attention, experts have begun applying its theories to many different fields of psychology. One particular area of interest is positive psychology within the work environment. There have been several studies which focus on the development of individual character strengths and subsequent improvement in levels of job satisfaction (Lavy, & Littman-Ovadia, 2016, Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010). Often the focus of workplace interventions is to correct unsuccessful behaviors, but positive psychology focuses on enhancing successful behaviors which are already present within an individual. Though this area of research is in its early stages, multiple studies have seemed to indicate a strong relationship between specific character strengths and job satisfaction, as will be discussed later in this introduction. It also appears that the character strengths most strongly related to satisfaction, such as hope, gratitude and spirituality (Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, & Seligman, 2010), fall under similar overarching virtues, in this case transcendence. Despite this indication, little research has been conducted to study the unique role virtues might play in work satisfaction and in alleviating causes of burnout on the job. This study aims to address this gap in research by examining the possible moderating effects of two specific character virtues on the relationship between two relatively well-known antecedents of burnout and experienced burnout.

This paper will first discuss positive psychology and the existing research and theoretical findings on character strengths and the workplace. It will then outline my hypotheses regarding the moderating effects of the virtues, specifically courage and transcendence, on the relationship between burnout and its antecedents, work overload and lack of control. An explanation of the methods used, and the results of the study will also be provided. Finally, it will conclude by

addressing the implications of the results and providing suggestions for future research in this area.

The VIA-IS, character strengths, and character virtues

As positive psychology garnered more interest among experts, researchers began to develop measures of the aspects which they believed made up human character. This development resulted in the creation of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) The VIA Classification identifies 24 individual character strengths or personality traits that are considered to be valued and positive within society (McGrath, 2017). Every person possesses all 24 character strengths to a different degree, and they are viewed as continua rather than categories (Harzer, & Ruch, 2013). These strengths are believed to embody six overarching cultural virtues (McGrath, 2017). For example, the character strengths of zest, perseverance, honesty, and bravery are all categorized under the virtue of courage. Since its creation, there have been multiple versions and adaptations of the VIA-IS. Some were expanded to allow for distribution to children, some were perfected to better measure particular concepts, and some were changed to measure broader aspects of character, such as virtues. These measures have been tested for accuracy and used in hundreds of research articles throughout the years. Recent research regarding positive psychology and the workplace has focused primarily on the character strengths as defined by the VIA-IS without much consideration for how those six overarching virtues might play a role in workplace well-being.

Character Strengths and Workplace Success

The relationship between character strengths and well-being in the work environment has been a topic of interest among many scholars. Current research seems to indicate that character strengths are positively related to workplace well-being. One study found little support indicating

that a strengths-based intervention had a significant direct effect on well-being at work, but there was some evidence of indirect effects with positive affect as a mediator. Their research also indicated that their specific strengths-based intervention positively influenced short term employee positive affect (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2016). Another study which focused more on correlational self-report data found that the more signature strengths (the 3-7 highest ranked strengths seen as most central to the individual) that were applied in the workplace, the higher the reported positive experiences at work (Harzer, & Ruch, 2013). Harzer and Ruch (2013) defined "applying" such strengths as, "showing strength related behavior". They note that because character strengths are personality traits it is not technically possible to possess or apply them, but "one can endorse statements relating to the character strengths". The results of both of these studies indicate that implementing and utilizing one's character strengths in the workplace, or "showing strength related behavior" is related significantly to higher levels of reported job satisfaction.

Implementing signature strengths on the job also contributed significantly to behavioral outcomes such as higher performance, more organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), and fewer counterproductive work behaviors (Littman-Ovadia, Lavy, & Boiman-Meshita, 2016). Continued research supported these findings, showing that reported strengths use at work was associated with several desirable outcomes, such as productivity, OCB, and job satisfaction with positive affect and work engagement acting as mediators (Lavy, & Littman-Ovadia, 2016). Littman-Ovadia and Davidovitch (2010) also found that character strength deployment was significantly correlated with both personal well-being and job satisfaction with congruence between academic study and occupation playing a role as well. Given the results of these studies, there seems to be some relationship between regularly using character strengths and overall work

well-being and satisfaction. It would make sense then to study if such strengths might help combat or cope with stressors on the job.

Character Strengths and Coping

The literature indicates that character strengths also relate positively to coping on the job. Harzer and Ruch's (2015) study found that intellectual, interpersonal, and emotional character strengths were in fact related to coping at work. The authors argued that because character strengths are trainable characteristics, they could be vital in helping employees decrease the negative effects of stress and cope with work-related stress as well (Harzer & Ruch, 2015). Another study yielded similar results, showing that participants who demonstrated healthy work-related behaviors differed in character strengths from those who demonstrated unhealthy behavioral patterns. Specifically, character strengths such as zest, persistence, hope, and curiosity seemed to play a major role in healthy work behaviors (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2012). The results of this study suggest that individual differences in character strengths are related to positive outcomes at work and helping to nurture and develop such strengths might assist with decreasing burnout and increasing satisfaction.

The Importance of Specific Character Strengths and their Overarching Virtues

Other researchers have noted the important roles of specific character strengths in predicting job satisfaction. The creators of the VIA found that across occupations in the United States, the character strengths of curiosity, zest, hope, gratitude, and spirituality were associated with higher levels of work satisfaction (Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, & Seligman, 2010). Harzer, Mubashar, and Dubreuil, (2017) found similar results in their study. They found that zest, teamwork, hope, love, gratitude, leadership, and perseverance were most highly correlated with total workplace well-being (Harzer, Mubashar, & Dubreuil, 2017). Other research narrowed

it down even further, suggesting that perseverance played the most important role in workplace well-being and satisfaction. Perseverance showed the highest positive relationship with work performance and the strongest negative relationship with counterproductive work behaviors, though there were mediators involved as well (Littman-Ovadia, & Lavy, 2016).

Existing research has used the VIA-IS to identify the relationship between character strengths and job satisfaction, but very little has focused on their relationship with burnout experience, especially with regard to specific virtues and aspects of burnout. One article explored the relationship between work related stress and different character strengths. It found that intellectual strengths partially mediated the negative effects of work-related stress on job satisfaction (Harzer & Ruch, 2015). This research suggests that some virtues, like wisdom and knowledge, transcendence, etc., may buffer specific burnout antecedents. Some research on burnout has suggested that traits such as spiritual involvement can act as a buffer for burnout experiences as well (Sprang, Craig, & Clark, 2011). A study done in 2012 was one of the few to suggest that character strengths associated with a specific virtue might be important to consider. They found that character strengths which fell under the virtue of wisdom were positively related to creative task performance and negatively related to reported stress level (Avey, Luthans, Hannah, Sweetman & Peterson, 2012).

Current Investigation

These findings beg the question, can the possession and implementation of specific virtues buffer against negative experiences on the job? Lack of control in the workplace (i.e. not having a say in work decisions, or day to day goals) and work overload (i.e. feeling overwhelmed with the amount of responsibilities and deadlines) are known to be antecedents of burnout experiences (Visser & Sebastiaan, 2008, West, Dyrbye, & Shanafelt, 2018). Burnout is a

type of stress that develops in response to stressful work conditions. It often leaves the individual

feeling lethargic and disengaged (Visser & Sebastiaan, 2008). Are individuals who rank high in

certain virtues less likely to experience the antecedents of work overload and lack of control and

therefore less likely to experience subsequent burnout? This study aims to answer those

questions and expand on previous findings.

Courage is believed to be a virtue that involves accomplishing a goal in the face of things

that oppose it (Al-Taher, 2019). Since many studies found that zest and perseverance seemed to

play a key role in predicting satisfaction, and those strengths fall under the virtue of courage, this

study examines how courage might influence the relationship between work overload and

burnout. The first hypothesis was that the character virtue of courage would moderate the

relationship between work overload and burnout.

Transcendence involves forging connections to the larger universe and deriving meaning

from life (Al-Taher, 2019). Several studies mentioned the significance of hope, gratitude, and

spirituality, which are all believed to make up the virtue of transcendence, therefore this study

focused on how the virtue of transcendence might affect the relationship between perceived lack

of control and burnout. Therefore, the second hypothesis was that transcendence would moderate

the relationship between lack of control and burnout experience.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

Two hundred undergraduate students (85% female, 15% male) from the University of

Akron completed an online survey in exchange for one point of extra course credit. Upon signing

up to participate, students were provided an external link to a Qualtrics survey through Sona

Systems. The entire survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the survey, students were automatically granted their credit.

The sample consisted mostly of Caucasian students (76.53%). 15.49% identified as African American, 4.69% identified as Asian American, 0.94% as Hispanic or Latino, and 2.35% as other. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 48 with the average age being approximately 20 years old.

When asked about their employment status, the majority of the sample indicated that they were employed part time (75.5%). However, the sample also included data from participants who indicated their employment status as full time (9%), student (8.5%), and self employed (4%). A small percentage also stated that they were not employed (3%). The number of hours worked per week ranged from 0 to 40+ and participants listed a wide variety of job titles including server, basketball manager, and dietary aide.

Measures

Demographics

Participants were first asked to supply demographic information regarding their gender, age, race, number of enrolled credit hours, major/minor, degrees received, grade point average, employment status, weekly hours, and job title.

Courage and Transcendence

Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "very much unlike me" to 5 = "very much like me"), character virtues were assessed with the 48 items on the VIA-IS-6 from McGrath (2017). These items indicated which of the six character virtues were the most prominent for participants

including the virtues of courage and transcendence. The participants were asked to indicate the degree to which the statements describe what they personally are like. An example of a question asked is, "If I feel down, I always think about what is good in my life". The coefficient alpha for the entire VIA-IS-6 was .81.

Burnout

The Oldenburg Burnout inventory, as employed by Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker (2010), was used to measure burnout among participants. It consisted of 16 items to measure current burnout in the workplace. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with those 16 items using a four-point Likert scale (1= "strongly disagree" to 4 = "strongly agree") One such item was, "During my work, I often feel emotionally drained". The coefficient alpha was .87.

Job Control

A measure of job control was taken based on Bosma et. al. (1997). Participants were asked to indicate how often the 15 listed items occurred at their job. They were to indicate frequency using a four-point Likert scale (1= "often" to 4 = "never"). For example, one item asks, "Do you have a choice in deciding how you do your job?" The coefficient alpha was .83.

Work/Role Overload

This study used the six-item measure of role overload as defined by Harris and Bladen (1994). The measure asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with those six items using a five-point Likert scale (1= "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree") The coefficient alpha was .85.

Results

An analysis of the descriptive statistics was conducted, and a correlation matrix was created for the variables age, sex, GPA, enrolled college credit hours, minimum weekly work hours, employment status, burnout, work overload, lack of control, courage, and transcendence (See Table 1). Significant negative correlations were found between age and the number of enrolled credit hours ($r = -.352$, $p < .001$), age and participant sex ($r = -.180$, $p < .05$), and age and lack of control at work ($r = -.191$, $p < .001$). Age also had significant positive correlations with the minimum number of hours worked per week ($r = .301$, $p < .01$) and employment status ($r = .150$, $p < .05$). Additionally, number of enrolled college credit hours had significant positive correlations with GPA ($r = .153$, $p < .05$) and lack of control at work ($r = .224$, $p < .01$). Minimum weekly work hours showed significant negative correlations with GPA ($r = -.199$, $p < .01$) and sex ($r = -.164$, $p < .05$), as well as significant positive correlations with employment status ($r = .493$, $p < .01$) and work overload ($r = .166$, $p < .05$). GPA and work overload, however, appeared to have a significant negative correlation ($r = -.217$, $p < .01$).

As expected, burnout had significant positive correlations with both work overload ($r = .408$, $p < .01$) and lack of control ($r = .478$, $p < .01$), in addition to having significant negative correlations with courage ($r = -.569$, $p < .01$) and transcendence ($r = -.455$, $p < .01$). Work overload demonstrated a significant positive relationship with lack of control ($r = .234$, $p < .01$) and a significant negative relationship with courage ($r = -.182$, $p < .01$). Likewise, lack of control showed significant negative correlations with both courage ($r = -.259$, $p < .01$) and transcendence ($r = -.139$, $p < .05$). Consistent with past research, the data indicated a strong positive correlation between courage and transcendence as well ($r = .647$, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that the hypotheses were not baseless and support the overall logic of this study.

Hypothesis 1 of this investigation proposed that the character virtue of courage would moderate the relationship between work overload and burnout experience. To test this hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was first carried out to investigate whether courage and work overload could significantly predict participants' burnout experiences. A previous analysis of the correlation between all variables hinted that a significant relationship may be present (see Table 1). The results of the regression indicated that the model was significant (R^2= .417, $F_{(2,196)}$ = 70.14, p <.001). Both courage (β = -.510, p<.001) and work overload (β=.312, p<.001) significantly contributed to the model, and the final predictive model was:

$$Burnout = 3.366 + (-.356*Courage) + (.170*Work\ Overload)$$

While this test shows that both constructs significantly predict burnout, it does not tell us whether courage acts as a moderator or not. In order to test this, an interaction variable, which was the product of courage and work overload, was created. A multiple regression was then carried out to investigate if this interaction significantly affected the relationship between work overload and burnout. The results of the regression indicated that courage did not have any significant moderating effects (see Table 2).

Similarly, Hypothesis 2 proposed that the character virtue of transcendence would moderate the relationship between lack of control and burnout experiences. Once again, we began by conducting a multiple regression analysis to confirm that transcendence and lack of control both significantly predicted burnout. The results of the regression indicated that the model was significant (R^2=.381, $F_{(2,196)}$ = 60.29, p <.001). Both transcendence (β= -.395, p<.001)

and lack of control (β= .421, *p*<.001) significantly contributed to that model, and the final

predictive model was:

$$Burnout = 2.605 + (-.275*Transcendence) + (.359*Job\ Control)$$

Again, this preliminary regression tells us nothing of the potential moderating effects of

transcendence. Consistent with the steps carried out to investigate Hypothesis 1, we again

created an interaction variable which was the product of transcendence and lack of control. We

then used a Multiple Regression analysis to see if this interaction had any significant effect on

the relationship between lack of control and burnout. Contrary to our hypothesis, we found no

significant moderating effects for the virtue of transcendence (see Table 3 for full results).

Discussion

The current study contributes to the existing research which applies positive psychology

to the intricacies of the work environment. Studies such as those conducted by Harzer,

Mubashar, & Dubreuil (2017) and Lavy, & Littman-Ovadia (2016) used the character strengths

of the VIA-IS to increase understanding of job satisfaction and other positive outcomes in the

workplace. Their research influenced the direction of this study and showed that implementing

aspects of positive psychology at work could lead to significant results. This investigation

supports that same idea. Although the data contradicted the hypotheses, this study still provides

some noteworthy findings which support further exploration in this area. It also expands on the

current understanding about character virtues and their possible benefits in relation to burnout

and its antecedents.

To review, neither courage nor transcendence had any moderating effects on the

relationship between work overload and lack of control and actual burnout experiences.

However, courage and work overload significantly predicted burnout and, when combined, both

predictors accounted for 41.7% of the variance in burnout. Similarly, transcendence and lack of

control also significantly predicted burnout and accounted for 38.1% of the variance.

Correlations also revealed significant relationships among other variables (See Table 1). Such

correlations suggest that some demographic variables may be important to consider when

studying antecedents of burnout. These findings expand on past research which has traditionally

only considered character strengths and shows that such constructs within positive psychology

deserve further research.

Implications

Although no moderating effects were found, the results indicated that character virtues

have significant negative correlations with both burnout and its antecedents. This shows that as

virtue scores increase, at least in the cases of transcendence and courage, burnout experiences

decrease. Now, causality cannot be inferred from these results, but the current findings imply

that this relationship might be worth investigating. Not only that, but when combined, courage

and work overload account for 41.7% of the variance in burnout. Lack of control and

transcendence seem to account for 38.1% of the variance as well. These results, though not the

focus of this investigation, indicate that character virtues may be an avenue to pursue in the

future, despite the previous focus on character strengths. Character virtues act as very strong

predictors for burnout in the workplace.

These findings also indicate that perhaps the positive effects of character strengths may

be due to the specific characteristics of that strength rather than the overarching virtue. If specific

traits like zest, perseverance, hope, and spirituality lead to satisfaction, as the studies by Gander,

Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss (2012) and Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, & Seligman (2010) suggest, then perhaps there is something unique about those particular strengths that is worth exploring.

Our results could be used to further both research and practice. If our findings hold true after replication and further analysis, measures of character strengths and virtues could be considered for the selection process. Our data indicates that these virtues are strong predictors of burnout. It would be in a company's best interest to hire employees who are less likely to experience burnout on the job. This might help reduce turnover rates and increase job satisfaction among employees since burnout, turnover, and job satisfaction are strongly inter-correlated (Scanlon & Skill, 2019).

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations worth noting in this study. The first is the restricted nature of the sample. Only relatively young, working college students were able to participate in this study. This may be one reason that age was found to correlate significantly with several other variables. The participants were also primarily female and Caucasian, meaning that although the sample was a fairly good size, it was not particularly diverse. There could be cultural differences or gender differences that affect the results of this study which I was unable to fully account for. There also may be some characteristics which are unique to working college students and may not be generalizable to other populations. For example, such students may be limited in the type of part time work they can pursue. Future research may want to look at different types of part time positions and how the results may vary based on those jobs.

Additionally, the current investigation relies heavily on self-report data. This limits our ability to determine causality and may have affected the accuracy of the data. It is possible that participants did not answer truthfully, especially since certain virtues may be viewed as favorable

characteristics to possess. Research participant carelessness should be considered as well since students were granted extra credit upon completion and likely had no real vested interest in accurately completing the survey. In order to successfully identify a causal relationship, more research will need to be conducted using experimental methods. Research would also benefit from a more diverse sample to help with generalizability.

This study also only looked at two of the six character virtues and did not consider the other antecedents of burnout. Therefore, there could be significant moderating effects among these other virtues and antecedents. Furthermore, the 24 character strengths which make up those virtues were not taken into consideration and may also have noteworthy affects if considered. Future research should focus on investigating the relationship between such character strengths and burnout in a more experimental setting.

The literature may benefit from replicating these findings in future studies as well, given the limited nature of the sample. It would also be interesting to see if character virtue enhancement or training practices might be able to reduce burnout experiences among workers in the field. Meyers & van Woerkom (2016) implemented a strengths-based intervention within an actual work environment and had little success in increasing well-being. However, they did not consider burnout or character virtues when creating their intervention. Future research might focus on work environments with high rates of burnout and attempt to reduce reported burnout experiences by allowing workers to enhance their character strengths and virtues. Additionally, if hiring workers who score high on specific virtues or character strengths could lower the rate of burnout and turnover within organizations, then future research should consider exploring the use of the VIA-IS within the hiring process.

Conclusion

Based on these findings, the specific character virtues of courage and transcendence have no moderating effects on the relationship between burnout and its antecedents of work overload and lack of control. However, this study did identify the unique ability of such character virtues in predicting burnout experience in the workplace. This implies a significant relationship and an interesting area for future research. Though the hypotheses were not confirmed, this study adds to the existing research by exploring the possible benefits of considering positive psychology in the workplace and by identifying the predictive capabilities of character virtues which were rarely discussed in previous studies.

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Table 1: Correlations Between Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Age	Credit Hours	Work Hours	GPA	Sex	Emp. Status	Burnout	Work Overload	Lack of Control	Courage	Transcendence
Age	20.48	3.81	1										
Credit Hours	14.83	2.77	-.352**	1									
Work Hours	19.23	10.46	.301**	-.129	1								
GPA	3.39	.587	-.083	.153*	-.199**	1							
Sex	.85	.36	-.180*	-.046	-.164*	.117	1						
Emp. Status	3.79	.84	.150*	-.113	.493**	.029	-.039	1					
Burnout	2.48	.44	-.133	.085	-.065	-.067	.062	.024	1				
Work Overload	2.40	.80	-.009	-.038	.166*	-.217**	-.107	-.012	.408**	1			
Lack of Control	2.46	.51	-.191**	.224**	-.019	-.094	.111	.079	.478**	.234**	1		
Courage	3.64	.63	.111	-.050	.090	.066	-.077	-.016	-.569**	-.182**	-.259**	1	
Transcendence	3.68	.63	.064	-.046	-.001	.056	.036	-.043	-.455**	-.125	-.139*	.647**	1

Note. N= 200. Emp. Status= employment status, **indicates that correlation is significant at p < .01, *indicates that correlation is significant at p < .05

Table 2: Multiple Regression of Courage as a Moderator

Predictors	B	SE B	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	3.30	.390		8.455	.000
Courage	-.338	.105	-.484	-3.225	.001
Work Overload	.194	.136	.358	1.425	.156
Courage*Work Overload	-.007	.037	-.049	-.187	.852

Note. N= 200. Dependent Variable: Burnout

Table 3: Multiple Regression of Transcendence as a Moderator

Predictors	B	SE B	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.572	.716		3.595	.000
Transcendence	.372	.286	.437	1.301	.195
Job Control	-.266	.190	-.382	-1.401	.163
JobControl* Transcendence	-.004	.077	-.019	-.048	.962

Note. N= 200. Dependent Variable: Burnout